Interdisciplinary Collaborative Auditing as a Method to Facilitate Teamwork/Teams in Empirical Ethics Projects

Veerle Provoost

Published online: 25 Feb 2020.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

COMMENTARY

Interdisciplinary Collaborative Auditing as a Method to Facilitate Teamwork/Teams in Empirical Ethics Projects

Veerle Provoost

Department of Philosophy and Moral Science, Bioethics Institute Ghent (BIG), Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

In our essentially interdisciplinary field, the lack of well-described methods to tackle the daily challenges of interdisciplinary collaboration is startling. Over the course of several projects, this lack instigated me to construct of a method that enables interdisciplinary teams (1) to set up and manage collaborations in a way that allows and purposely builds in disciplinary and researcher heterogeneity; (2) to improve trustworthiness and conceptual authenticity; and (3) to allow for the team to focus on normative research questions.

Tensions in interdisciplinary teams often arise over authorship and balancing teamwork with individual research agendas. Moreover, in empirical ethics projects, non-ethicists may fear to be employed as handmaidens who merely serve the empirical ingredients for (in their perspective) the ethicists' unfamiliar ventures: a relationship rightly criticized (Haimes 2002). Moreover, the lack of familiarity with the approaches of ethicists, such as their tendency to problematize issues that may be central to other scholars' work, can become a breeding ground for distrust.

Against this tantalizing background, I propose interdisciplinary collaborative auditing (ICA), a method that combines elements from auditing models for qualitative research (Akkerman et al. 2008; Cornish, Gillespie, and Zittoun 2013) with a management structure that builds upon the five components of good quality interdisciplinary research (Bronstein 2003): interdependence, newly created professional activities, flexibility, collective ownership of goals, and reflection on process. ICA has mostly been used for qualitative research projects encompassing in-depth analyses of data that was purposefully gathered for use in ethical (normative) deliberation. Substantial work on the method was done during an empirical bioethics study (on assisted reproductive technologies and social and genetic parenthood) conducted by seven researchers with backgrounds in ethics,

psychology, midwifery, and counseling (Van Parys et al. 2016; Wyverkens et al. 2014).

Grounded in a perspectivist view on knowledge construction, ICA starts from acknowledging disciplinary and researcher heterogeneity. Rather than trying to merge varied approaches into one amalgamated method, it purposely assimilates this diversity in an organization structure with a built-in validation procedure. The integrative work in ICA is done on two levels: in the team as a whole and in subteams. Each subteam is built around a particular research question and led by a junior or senior researcher (the auditee) who conducts the analysis. During team meetings, research questions for subteam analyses are identified and prioritized, key concepts clarified and operationalized, and data collection is prepared (including the construction of instruments) and overseen. The team negotiates and approves the composition of all subteams (including subteam members' respective authorships for publications) and facilitates reflection on ongoing collaboration processes in the subteams. Linking authorship to research roles brings clarity and puts an early focus on deliverables. It also makes it easier to disclose authorship contributions in publications (Wyverkens et al. 2014). We found that this two-level approach promoted a collective ownership of goals (Cornish, Gillespie, and Zittoun 2013) and appreciation for each other's individual research agendas and warranted trust and individual agency.

Roles in subteams are assigned depending on the research question and researchers' disciplines,[1] expertise, analysis styles, and individual research agendas (e.g., to allow coherency in a PhD project). In each team, one or several auditors (with different disciplinary backgrounds than the researcher) are appointed. Contrary to external auditing, ICA auditors have a dual role of auditor and co-researcher. They

---

CONTACT Veerle Provoost ✉ veerle.provoost@ugent.be 📧 Department of Philosophy and Moral Science, Bioethics InstituteGhent (BIG), Ghent University, Blandijnberg 2, B-9000 Ghent, Belgium

[1]In this, however, we accept that a single researcher cannot fully represent their discipline.

function as what Akkerman et al. (2008) refer to as "critical friends." In practice, the researcher provides the auditors with an audit report including, for example, a selection of raw data (e.g., interview transcripts), a first-draft coding structure, descriptions of codes, and a condensed selection of raw data per code. The auditor starts by becoming familiar with the data (e.g., by reading two complete interview transcripts) and memo writing (related to methods of bracketing), working from the raw data to the researchers' draft coding structure (the latter only comes in play after memo writing on the raw data is finished). Auditors examine whether the analysis is consistent and grounded in the data by discussing and challenging the structure of the themes and providing alternatives and counterexamples (Hill, Thompson, and Williams 1997). For this, several subteam meetings will be required. ICA is not consensus driven. It grants a high level of control to the lead researcher, accepting that the researcher, although supported and challenged by the auditor(s), remains the main person (and tool) in the analysis. Auditor input should thus not necessarily be integrated in the analysis. Nonetheless, an essential feature of ICA is that the researcher documents all analysis-related decisions and arguments for those decisions to promote accountability (Akkerman et al. 2008).

ICA's auditing method bears resemblance to but is different from methods for scientific collaboration, such as team science approach, and more specifically an "integrated research team" (Bennett and Gadlin 2012). The same is true for methods for improving validity and trustworthiness such as interrater reliability, insider/outsider pairs, and triangulation. The added value of ICA is its purposive incorporation of a method to increase trustworthiness and conceptual authenticity in a team management approach. As seen in other methodological approaches, auditing reports add to a paper trail that improves trustworthiness and transparency (Cornish, Gillespie, and Zittoun 2013). These reports often identify examples of interdisciplinary co-construction in the interpretation of the data and provide material for a more broad reflection on a team level. In one subteam, for instance, two different readings of the data were put forward about how parents made sense of the disclosure of gamete donation to their child. The psychologist (researcher) opted to give voice to the participants' accounts of open communication, whereas the ethicist (auditor) problematized these accounts and linked them to how the parents spoke of their recollection of normative professional advice, their perception of their responsibilities, and their fears about

harming their child in the disclosing process. The result, which we linked to the alternation of styles of analysis, was a richer, multilayered description (Van Parys et al. 2016).

Key to ICA is the alteration of roles. During most of the project, a team member works as a researcher in one subteam and (mostly simultaneously) as an auditor in other subteams. This creates interdependence and (indirect) reciprocity between team members, who structurally contribute to the shaping of knowledge in each other's projects while holding considerable control over their own. While ICA allots clearly articulated roles to researchers in the subteams, on a team level this generates role blurring and flexibility (Bronstein 2003).

A team coordinator keeps an overview of interrelated subteams and monitors project demarcation (thereby avoiding overlap and potential conflict) while also facilitating cross-pollination between research questions and findings. From the start of the project, training and reflexivity exercises help teams to focus on the interdisciplinary nature of our work and on normative questions, as well as normative stances of researchers. I will give three examples from past projects. First, during the construction of interview guides, memo-writing exercises using data from other projects with comparable research questions helped us reflect on what team members considered to be discipline-specific viewpoints and how these related to our project. Second, scoping practices for data relating to normative questions were used to familiarize non-ethicists with these questions and to help them to recognize and further explore moral reasoning, a skill needed during both interviews and analysis. During the exercises, the relationship between specific findings and ethical theory was studied. Ethicists problematized findings that on first sight looked straightforward and not normatively laden, which led to the formulation of new research questions. Third, a Socratic group conversation based on a scenario about parenthood (developed as an interview elicitation technique for moral reasoning) was used as an exercise similar to bracketing: reflecting on co-construction through exploring and explicating our own views on our research topic.

By now, readers probably, and rightly, suspect that ICA teams take up considerable time and effort. Before this is seen as an insurmountable disadvantage, it is worth noting what can be achieved based on this investment. By offering active and well-delineated roles from the start of the project, long and messy preparatory phases (with often failed attempts for consensus on particular approaches) can be avoided. The

fact that analyses are distributed over smaller teams early on contributes to high publication rates. What is more, in my experience, ICA always resulted in richer accounts, more rigor, positive synergies, and more clarity and transparency about methodical decisions and processes.

Although ICA was designed for use in larger teams, I had the privilege of trying out modified versions in smaller teams and supporting pairs of researchers who worked on individual projects (as most funding goes to one-researcher projects) using subteam procedures. When lacking sufficient numbers for a team, pairing two researchers for collaboration (given that they have comparable research questions, albeit not necessarily on related topics) can help prevent isolation and increase research quality.

Based on my experience, the output from projects using ICA is structurally different from and of a higher quality than what would have been produced without the use of this method. ICA allowed for a positive and safe research context to be created in which team members could challenge each other's approaches and interpretations. But above all, it helped us to find a context in which ethicists can bring critical and normative questions to ongoing analyses while at the same time contributing to the work of their colleagues with other disciplinary backgrounds.

Author contributions

Veerle Provoost wrote the article.

Conflicts of interest

None.

Ethical approval

This study was based on several studies that were approved by the Ethics Committee of the University Hospital Ghent or the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy of Ghent University, Belgium.

References

Akkerman, S., W. Admiraal, M. Brekelmans, and H. Oost. 2008. Auditing quality of research in social sciences. *Quality & Quantity* 42 (2):257–74. doi: 10.1007/s11135-006-9044-4.

Bennett, L. M., and H. Gadlin. 2012. Collaboration and team science: From theory to practice. *Journal of Investigative Medicine*: The Official Publication of the American Federation for Clinical Research 60 (5):768–75. doi: 10.2310/JIM.0b013e318250871d.

Bronstein, L. R. 2003. A model for interdisciplinary collaboration. *Social Work* 48 (3):297–306. doi: 10.1093/sw/48.3.297.

Cornish, F., A. Gillespie, and T. Zittoun. 2013. Collaborative analysis of qualitative data. In *The Sage handbook of qualitative data analysis*, ed. U. Flick, 79–93. London, UK: SAGE.

Haimes, E. 2002. What can the social sciences contribute to the study of ethics? Theoretical, empirical and substantive considerations. *Bioethics* 16 (2):89–113. doi: 10.1111/1467-8519.00273.

Hill, C. E., B. J. Thompson, and E. N. Williams. 1997. A guide to conducting consensual qualitative research. *The Counseling Psychologist* 25 (4):517–72. doi: 10.1177/0011000097254001.

Van Parys, H., E. Wyverkens, V. Provoost, P. De Sutter, G. Pennings, and A. Buysse. 2016. Family communication about donor conception: A qualitative study with lesbian parents. *Family Process* 55 (1):139–54. doi: 10.1111/famp.12112.

Wyverkens, E., V. Provoost, A. Ravelingien, P. De Sutter, G. Pennings, and A. Buysse. 2014. Beyond sperm cells: A qualitative study on constructed meanings of the sperm donor in lesbian families. *Human Reproduction* 29 (6):1248–54. doi: 10.1093/humrep/deu060.